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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUALA LUMPUR 000799

SIPDIS

FOR EAP/MTS, PRM, G/TIP, H

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/09/2018

TAGS: [PREF PHUM PREL KTIP BM TH MY](#)

SUBJECT: STAFFDEL LUSE DISCUSSES TRAFFICKING OF BURMESE

REFUGEES

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 786 - STAFFDEL LUSE ENGAGES GOM

[1](#)B. KUALA LUMPUR 495 - ALLEGED TRAFFICKING OF BURMESE

[1](#)C. KUALA LUMPUR 147 - TIP REPORT

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark, Reason 1.4 (b and d).

Summary

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[1](#)1. (C) Keith Luse, Professional Staff Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, visited Malaysia August 25-31 to investigate reports of the trafficking of Burmese refugees to Thailand and the alleged involvement of Malaysian Immigration officials in such trafficking, as previously reported by Embassy (ref B). The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), NGOs, refugees and activists provided information and accounts of refugees trafficked to the Thai border from Immigration detention centers in Malaysia. The local observers all described the situation as serious, recurring, and involving a large number of Burmese refugees. Senior Malaysian Immigration officials denied the allegations, but requested further information for their follow-up during a meeting with Luse on August 29. In separate meetings, Luse informed Ramlan Ibrahim, Undersecretary for Southeast Asian Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Kamal Khalid, Head of the Communications Unit in the Prime Minister's Office of the upcoming Senate report on alleged trafficking of Burmese refugees in Malaysia. Luse also met with Thai officials in the border town of Sungai Golok, who shared information on trafficking cases involving Burmese refugees in that border region. Luse expressed interest in identifying ways the U.S. could provide additional assistance to Burmese refugees in Malaysia to improve their conditions. Post will provide specific suggestions separately. Staffdel Luse's visit was very useful in bringing the Burmese refugee problem to the attention of senior GOM officials. The visit builds on Post's efforts to date to highlight the issue and work with local NGOs and the UNHCR on ways to improve refugee protection, including in conjunction with the major U.S. resettlement program for Burmese refugees. End Summary.

Trafficking Allegations

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[1](#)2. (C) During his August 25-31 visit to Malaysia and Thailand, Mr. Luse sought information related to reports by resettled Burmese refugees that, with the involvement of Malaysian Immigration officers, Burmese refugees have been trafficked to the Thai-Malaysian border. Luse met with various NGOs, activists, refugees, and the UNHCR Acting Country Representative and discussed these allegations, along with the general refugee situation in Malaysia and at the border. The meetings generally corroborated allegations that

lower level Malaysian immigration officials are involved in trafficking of Burmese refugees, in line with information previously reported by Post (ref. B). Local activists, Alice Nah and Eric Paulsen, and NGO representatives from Tenaganita told Luse in separate meetings the traffickers included Thai, Malaysian, and Burmese nationals.

¶3. (C) Sources described incidents in which lower level Immigration officials transport Burmese refugees from Immigration Detention Centers (IDC) using official vehicles. The same officials then take the group of refugees to the border, usually between 1 and 3 a.m., where they are handed over to traffickers operating from the Thai side of the border. Immigration officials received between 400-700 ringgit (\$125-220) per refugee. The size of the refugee group sold to the traffickers averaged between 45 - 100 persons, including men, women, and children. The traffickers would then allow the refugees the chance to contact someone in Malaysia that could pay a ransom of 1500-1900 ringgit (\$470-600) per person. Those able to pay were smuggled back into Malaysia and released. Human rights activists Eric Paulsen and Alicia Nah each estimated about 20 percent of the refugees handed over to traffickers are unable to pay the ransom. Those unable to pay were sold to the Thai fishing industry, factories, farms, or plantations if a man. Traffickers allegedly sell women to brothels, hotels, and into domestic servitude. Some sources indicated traffickers might force some children to work as child beggars in Bangkok and elsewhere. (Note: This last allegation remains unclear as many sources told us they did not have firm information on what happened to children. In some cases, the children stay with their mother and returned to Malaysia for a lower ransom. End Note.) The UNHCR, Jesuit Relief Services local

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affiliate, A.C.T.S., Tenaganita, and individual human rights activists believe the allegations are accurate. Refugees that described their experiences being sent to the border to Poloff and Luse closely match the allegations of trafficking. (Note: The allegations are also very similar written statements alleging Immigration officers handing over Burmese refugees as early as 1995. End Note.)

#### GOM Informed of Possible U.S. Senate Actions

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¶4. (SBU) In separate meetings, Luse informed Ramlan Ibrahim, Undersecretary for Southeast Asian Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Kamal Khalid, Head of the Communications Unit in the Prime Minister's Office of the upcoming Senate report on alleged trafficking of Burmese refugees in Malaysia. On both occasions, the Malaysian officials focused the discussion on broader issues. Ramlan spoke about the general immigration problems Malaysia faces; especially undocumented economic migrants. (Note: The GOM repeatedly has raised pull-factor concerns during our discussions on Malaysian refugee policy. End Note.)

#### Immigration Chiefs Deny Allegations

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¶5. (C) Luse met with Director-General for Immigration Mahmood Adam and Immigration Enforcement Director Ishak Mohamad on August 29 to discuss the trafficking allegations. Both men categorically denied involvement of Immigration officials in the trafficking of Burmese refugees. Mahmood claimed the government paid Immigration officers well, with newly employed officers earning about 1,300 ringgit per month (about \$400). He indirectly tried to implicate the People's Volunteer Corps (RELA), a para-military auxiliary, noting its members augment Immigration's work force in IDCs by providing guards. Luse stated that U.S. law enforcement officials had written statements from trafficking victims, phone numbers, and bank account numbers of some of the traffickers. Ishak requested information that Malaysian authorities could use to investigate the allegations. Luse asked about the level of

UNHCR access to IDCs. Ishak assured Luse UNHCR members had full access to IDCs as long as they wrote in advance to coordinate visits. He also told Luse that the UNHCR did not have a right to inspect IDCs, as they operated under Malaysian law. (Note: Malaysia does not recognize refugee status, including those registered with the UNHCR. Burmese refugees are subject to arrest as illegal migrants. End Note.) Mahmood Adam did express his gratitude for the advanced warning of the upcoming Senate report and possible Senate hearings.

#### Luse at Thai-Malaysian Border

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¶6. (C) On August 30, Luse traveled from Kota Bharu into Southern Thailand where he met with Thai police officials in the town of Sungai Golok. According to Luse in a debrief he gave poloff after the visit, the Thai police provided information, including photos and documents, on the 2005 arrests of three traffickers who had victimized Burmese nationals. The police offered to follow up on any specific information available.

#### Post Actions on Refugees

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¶7. (C) Staffdel Luse's visit was highly useful in bringing the Burmese refugee trafficking issue to the attention of senior GOM officials. While Immigration gave no immediate indication that they would actively and aggressively take steps to deal with this problem, it is clear that Luse's presentation, to include the possibility of Senate action in the next month or two, has caught their attention. Luse's visit was also an effective follow-on to Post's actions to date on this issue, which have included: regular meetings with involved NGOs, interviews with refugees, and close coordination with UNHCR in conveying concerns over reported trafficking of Burmese refugees to Immigration officials beginning in May (ref. B). Post will continue to actively follow-up with Immigration, MFA and the PM's office, as appropriate, over the coming weeks/months to seek progress in ending this practice. In the broader context of the U.S. refugee resettlement program, Post together with UNHCR and U.S. Refcoord Bangkok has engaged Malaysian Immigration officials to secure the release of refugees held in Immigration Detention Centers.

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#### Possible Use of Future Funding

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¶8. (U) At the conclusion of his visit, Luse requested post's thoughts on possible additional programs to assist Burmese refugees in Malaysia. Currently, the U.S. funds a variety of programs to support refugees in Malaysia through the UNHCR and, secondarily, through direct grants to civil society partners, in all totaling some \$540,000. If made available, future funding could be utilized to augment informal refugee schools operated by local NGOs, increase medical care, and provide legal services. Post will provide more detailed thoughts on this shortly.

¶9. (U) This message was cleared by Staffdel Luse.  
KEITH